

The Silence of Hermippos: Greece in the Poetry of Cavafy

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Hellene: a. An ancient Greek, of genuine Grecian race.
b. A subject of the modern kingdom of Greece or Hellas. *OED*.

1. On 29 April 1933 Cavafy died in Alexandria, the city in which he was born. There is some reason for satisfaction in this. Visitors to his apartment on the second floor of 10 Rue Lepsius knew how self-contained Cavafy's small and familiar world in Alexandria was. Rue Lepsius was home for the last twenty-six years of Cavafy's life: 'Below, the brothel caters for the flesh. And there is the church [St. Savvas's] which forgives sin. And there is the hospital where we die.'¹ The first floor of 10 Rue Lepsius never catered to Cavafy's flesh, but the church forgave his sins, and he died in the hospital. He could have died in an hospital in Athens where he had gone the year before for treatment of cancer of the throat. He stayed there for a time at the Hôtel Cosmopolite, and from Kifissia he found the sight of Hymettos and the mountains to the north 'boring'. He returned home to die, 'an Alexandrian of the Alexandrians', an epitaph he very nearly composed for himself.²

C. P. Cavafy was never a Greek of the Greeks. On the

1. Quoted by Robert Liddell in *Cavafy: A Critical Biography* (London, 1974), p. 180.

2. Liddell, *Cavafy*, p. 206, seems to take his epitaph—'He was an Alexandrian of the Alexandrians'—from the end of Cavafy's epitaph 'For Ammonis, Who Died at 29, in 610' (1917).

mainland of Greece—of Greece ‘proper’—he is known as ‘the Alexandrian’: protean, distant, ironic, epigrammatic; a man of masks—his face being the most exquisite mask of all; a poet who was devoted to his craft and who found his inspiration in small details such as glass beads; an historian and fabulist who found his parables in the backwaters of Greek history.

It is not known when Cavafy ‘returned’ to Greek nationality, but by his own profession he was not a Greek. The word with which he described himself was not *Ἕλλην*, nor *ἐλληνίζων*, but *ἐλληνικός*.³ The full meaning of this careful distinction can be gotten only from a study of Cavafy’s poetry, but the events of his life and his rare contacts with Greece bear him out. In a long and sedentary life he visited Greece on four occasions. In 1901 he spent six weeks there; he returned in November 1903, and again briefly in August 1905 to be with his brother Alexander, who was dying of typhoid. He was to return to Greece nearly thirty years later for a last visit in the summer and early autumn of 1932 for treatment of cancer of the throat. His trips to Greece were anything but a return to a fatherland. We do not know with what emotions Cavafy set foot on Greek soil on 16 June 1901. The Piraeus he described in a journal which he kept in English as ‘a very nice little place’ and Athens struck the tourist from Egypt as ‘a very, very pretty town—quite European in the French and Italian line’.⁴ His reactions to Greece are prosaic, worthy of post cards, and cast in English—a world apart from the enthusiasm and piety of a Byron or a Calvos setting foot on Greek soil for the first time. But Cavafy’s attitude of a tourist in a foreign and European country protected him from the collision of European dream and Greek reality.⁵ Until the age of thirty-eight Cavafy had spent most of his life in Alexandria, with a period in Constantinople (1882–5) and a longer stay in Liverpool (1873–7). In Alexandria he did not feel an exile, and it seems

3. Recorded by Timos Melanos in *Περί Καβάφη* (Alexandria, 1935), p. 6; cf. Melanos, *Ἀπαντα*, I (Alexandria, 1943), pp. 221 and 57.

4. Quoted by Liddell, *Cavafy*, p. 103, from Cavafy’s English journal, in Kavafis, *Πεζά*, ed. G. A. Papoutsakis (Athens, 1963), p. 263.

5. The most violent collision of European dream and the reality of revolutionary and modern Greece came in July 1826, when the great patriot and poet, Andreas Kalvos, landed in Nauplion, an episode well rendered by Philip Sherrard in ‘Andreas Kalvos and the Eighteenth-Century Ethos’, *BMGS*, I (1975), 177–8.

from his early poetry that his soul never sought the land of the Greeks.

Gregory Xenopoulos, who met him first in 1901, and other Athenians who met him later found that Cavafy spoke Greek with a slight English, or 'Oxford', accent.⁶ This is the same man whom E. M. Forster discovered as he traversed the streets of Alexandria, when he turned to respond to his name proclaimed and saw 'a Greek gentleman in a straw hat, standing absolutely motionless at a slight angle to the universe'.⁷ What Mr. Cavafy saw at his slight angle to the universe was Alexandria. Below his balcony was the street movement and the life of the modern city, and in his mind's eye he could contemplate the history, art, and sensuality of a city that was not for most a 'city of the mind'. He was an Alexandrian writing for Alexandrians.

Even when the first edition of his poetry appeared in 1935, he was hardly known in Athens and in Greece 'proper'. Working alone in the small Greek commercial outpost of Alexandria, Cavafy had the advantage of not being obscured by the heavy shadow of Palamas which covered mainland Greece. Greece hardly knew Cavafy, and Cavafy knew, but ignored, Greece; it was a place glimpsed out of the corner of his eye. It is an insignificant place-name on the map of his Hellenism. Greece proper appears in Cavafy's 'authorized' poetry only twice, and always as a distant place which, when viewed from the perspective gained at the edges of things, moves from the centre to the periphery. In the 154 poems of Cavafy's Canon, *Ellada* appears first, and perhaps inevitably, in 'Dimaratos' (1921)—just twenty years after Cavafy's first visit to Greece. Three years later Cavafy spoke of Greece for the last time publicly in 'In Alexandria, 31 B.C.' (1924). It is remarkable that the word Greece occurs so late and so infrequently in the work of the Greek poet who heard 125 voices within him proclaim him an historian and who has a right to be called the La Fontaine of Greek history.⁸ He was fifty-eight when he spoke of

6. Cf. Liddell, *Cavafy*, p. 104, and Marguerite Yourcenar, *Présentation critique de Constantin Cavafy* (Paris, 1958), p. 11.

7. 'The Poetry of C. P. Cavafy', reprinted in *Pharos and Pharillon* (Richmond, Surrey, 1923), p. 75.

8. Recorded by G. Lechonitis, *Καβαφικά αὐτοσχόλια* (Alexandria, 1942), p. 22.

Greece in his 'public' poetry—that is, the poems he prepared for private circulation among his friends and admirers. Was Greece and all of its complex and deep associations for a Greek (and non-Greek) something Cavafy was indifferent to? Or was he reticent about a place whose meaning he knew and felt, but which he preferred not to speak of?

Reasons for referring to Cavafy's reticence or silence come from the *Anekdotia* in which Cavafy spoke of Greece in three poems—two of them written before 1911, the year which Cavafy, and his other critics, chose to divide his work into two periods. *Ellada* makes its appearance in an early fragment called 'The Daughter of Menkeras' (1892), in 'Julian at the Mysteries' (1896), and last and most significantly in a poem from 1914 which Cavafy called 'Returning from Greece'. An atlas of place names in Cavafy's poetry would have two entries for Greece in the poems of the Canon and three in the *Anekdotia*. By contrast, Pontani's Glossary to the *Odes* of Andreas Calvos has twenty-six entries for Hellas. Calvos and Cavafy seem to stand a world apart, but there is some truth in Seferis' notion that somewhere on the surface of this globe there is a meeting-place for poets so diverse in their feeling for country as a Solomos (or a Calvos) and a Cavafy.⁹

There are reasons for believing that Cavafy had strong feelings for Greece—both the Greece of the mainland and the larger Greece of his own vision of the Greek world. But he did not find a home in Athens or Greece proper. He found it on the edges and in the backwaters of the Greek world and Greek experience. In his poetry, Alexandria and the marginal culture of the Greek diaspora, or centrifugal Greece, eclipsed the classical, European, and university Greece of the mainland. One of Cavafy's European admirers immediately recognized how different Cavafy's Greece was: 'Athens and Sparta, so drubbed into us in school, are to him two quarrelsome little slave states, ephemeral beside the Hellenistic kingdoms that followed them, just as these are ephemeral beside the secular empire of Constantinople. He reacts against the tyranny of Classicism—Pericles and Aspasia and Themistocles and all

9. G. Seferis, *Κ. Π. Καβάφης*, *Τ. Σ. 'Ελιοτ· Παράλληλοι*, in *Δοκίμεις*, 3rd ed., I (Athens, 1974), p. 346.

those bores.’¹⁰ Another Englishman, with a higher opinion of Pericles, Aspasia, and Themistocles than E. M. Forster, saw essentially the same features in Cavafy’s Hellenism and sense of Greek history: ‘He did not share the romantic conception of Hellas as a world of gods and heroes, the home of liberty and the cradle of civilization. Nor had he the Parnassian love of the statuesque and pictorial sides of Greek life with its decorous rites and its domestic sanctities. What interested him most, what made him feel most truly at home, was the varied Greek world which once spread from Sicily to Central Asia and embraced many men who were not of Greek race and who spoke the Greek language with Asiatic intonations and faulty syntax.’¹¹

Implicit in what both E. M. Forster and C. M. Bowra have to say about Cavafy’s Hellenism is the fact that he found mainland Greece and the culture of classical Greece something foreign to him. Alexandria and that other Greece which the European conception of Greece had made into a backwater was his home: ‘kings, emperors, patriarchs, have trodden the ground between his office and his flat.’¹² Cavafy’s *πατρίδα*, in both the strict and large senses of this word, was Alexandria. Yet it is possible to see in the outlines of Cavafy’s Hellenism the faint and nearly effaced contours of another and more familiar Greece. Hellas did enter Cavafy’s range of vision, but he contemplated it, as he contemplated everything, at a slight angle.

2. Greece in the *Anekdotia*: Until 1911.

The poetry of Cavafy’s Canon opens in ‘Walls’ (1896) on the small, closed space occupied by the poet who has been imprisoned within walls. We do not learn who built these walls; Cavafy speaks only of ‘they’. Walls (*τείχη*) rhyme with fate (*τύχη*); the one is the physical manifestation of the other. Both lock together to make a prisoner of the poet and shut him off from the world outside. We do not know where the outside world is located. This setting was first announced in the unpublished ‘The Four Walls of my Room’ (March 1893); it is the setting of

10. E. M. Forster, *Pharos and Pharillon*, pp. 77–8.

11. C. M. Bowra, ‘Constantine Cavafy and the Greek Past’, in *The Creative Experiment* (London, 1967), p. 32.

12. E. M. Forster, *Pharos and Pharillon*, p. 78.

‘Windows’ (1901) and ‘The City’ (1910), where the poet is trapped in ‘this small corner’ of the world.¹³ Not surprisingly, but significantly I think, this enclosed space of the poet shut in and turned inward is also that of the erotic poems of the Canon: ‘In a room—empty, small, four walls only’ (‘Chandelier’ [1914]).

But gradually this small enclosed world begins to change with the outlook of the poet who created it and inhabited it. One can now speak of an outlook. The inner space of Cavafy’s poetry is pierced by a window which is no longer a frame on one of four walls; it is given a balcony; and it is endowed with a peculiar point of view. The small inner space is now a vantage ground vis-à-vis the outside world; the immured poet has become an observer. This transformation can be dated to 1911—the year of Cavafy’s masterpiece ‘The God Abandons Antony’. The change is subtle. Cavafy invites Mark Antony, whom history had trapped at midnight in a room somewhere in Alexandria, to move to the window, to listen to the divine music that is passing him by and to bid farewell to the city he is losing: *πλησίασε σταθερά πρὸς τὸ παράθυρο*. The title of this poem comes from Plutarch’s *Life of Antony* (75), but the window and the point of view do not.

By 1917 the world outside, once so threatening, has become so transformed by memory that it can provide some relief for the poet who was becoming ‘all memory’¹⁴ and whose thoughts dwell on the sensual pleasures of the past: ‘In the Evening’:

Then, sad, I went out on to the balcony,
went out to change my thoughts at least by seeing
something of this city I love,
a little movement in the streets, in the shops.

By the end of his life, the confinement of ‘Walls’, ‘Windows’, and ‘The City’, had given way to a distinct vantage point on the

13. I quote the poetry of Cavafy in the new translation of E. Keeley and P. Sherrard, *C. P. Cavafy: Collected Poems* (Princeton, 1975), except for those of the *anekdota* which do not appear in this collection. For these I offer my own translations.

14. *γιομάτος μνήμη*—in Kazantzakis’ characterization of the poet, as he saw him in a visit of February 1927, ‘Ο Καβάφης, in *Ταξιδεύοντας: Ἱταλία-Αἰγυπτος-Σινᾶ-Ἱερουσαλὴμ-Κύπρος-Ὁ Μοριάς*, 2nd ed. (Athens, 1965), p. 79.

world outside, which had become transformed by memories of a long life spent in the same places. Indeed, the student of Cavafy's Alexandria can speak of more than two thousand years spent in the same places. 'In the Same Space' (1929):

The setting of houses, cafés, the neighbourhood
that I've seen and walked through years on end:
I created you while I was happy, while I was sad,
with so many incidents, so many details.
And, for me, the whole of you has been transformed
into feeling.

Αισθηματοποιήθηκες: This transformation of inner space is accompanied by an enlargement of the poet's sense of time and place as his world radiates out in time and space from its centre in Alexandria to include almost all of Greek history. But there is something missing. Cavafy's Hellenism reaches from the Homeric poems to the 'great, new Hellenic world' which emerged from the conquests of Alexander the Great, to the battle of Actium, Julian the Apostate, Anna Comnena and the streets of his own Alexandria. It did include Greece, but any map of the Greek world as it emerges from the poetry of Cavafy's Canon will reveal that his imagination, sensibility, and sympathy concentrate on and dwell along the edges of the Greek world—the world that had expanded outward with the conquests of Alexander. But the centre of the Greek world is nearly empty. Mainland Greece occupies a dead space in the map of Cavafy's Hellenism. In his poetry Samosata, Tyana and Osroini are places which seem more familiar and meaningful than does Athens.

Yet Cavafy was not completely silent on Greece or the Greek mainland. Two of the earliest poems of the Canon are 'Thermopylae' (1903) and 'Trojans' (1905). But in the first the honour the poet has to bestow goes not to Leonidas and the Spartans who fell in defence of Greece. It goes rather to all those who 'in the life they lead / define and guard a Thermopylae'. This level of abstraction makes of the Greek 'defence of the West' in 480 B.C. a metaphor for all heroism that recognizes and faces the inevitable. The plural *Θερμοπύλες* could be ambiguous. It could be taken to mean Thermopylae or 'a

Thermopylae'. But the level of abstraction of this poem, of 'Trojans', and of 'Ithaca' (1911), makes it clear that Cavafy is concerned not with a battle and defeat of 480 B.C., but with any situation like that the Spartans faced in 480 B.C. What is philosophical about Cavafy's poetry of history is that he discovered *οἷα ἄν γένοιτο in τὰ γενόμενα*. Gradually he became to accept the 'monotony' of history: 'The same things / will happen to us again and again, / the same moments come and go' ('Monotony' [1908]). And so, 'our efforts are like those of the Trojans'. Cavafy read Homer and Herodotus with the same detachment that he read Bevan's *The House of Seleucus* and Mahaffy's *History of Egypt under the Ptolemaic Dynasty*.

Ellada does not make its appearance in the Canon until Cavafy published his final version of 'Dimaratos' in 1921. Nearly thirty years earlier, Cavafy spoke of Greece in a fragmentary poem to which he gave the title 'The Daughter of Menkeras' (April 1892).¹⁵ The subject of this poem is the murder of a young Mede, Ramanakti, the daughter of Menkeras. History does not record the name of her murderer, but the poet-historian considers two possibilities: either she was killed by a Persian satrap to outrage a subject people and vent his own pent-up resentment at the abuse he himself was subject to, or she was killed by a Hellene:

a Greek who in his pride could see nothing in the world
but his Greece and could not care for the tender feelings
of this poor barbarian girl or the last pure desire
of her innocent life.

This poem is quite at home among the early poems Cavafy neither wanted to publish nor destroy. The first line of 'King Claudius' (1899) characterizes the range of Cavafy's early experiments: 'My mind now moves to distant places.' The titles of the *Anekdotia* plot his erratic course as he moved unsurely, in *katharévousa*, to foreign parts: 'Lohengrin', 'Salome', 'Sam el Nesim', 'Ali Pasha', 'Indian Ikon'. The *Anekdotia* suggest how much denial went to make up the affirmation of the Canon.

Even so, 'The Daughter of Menkeras' announces in its

15. C. P. Cavafy, *Ἀνέκδοτα Ποιήματα: 1882–1923*, ed. G. Savidis (Athens, 1968), p. 23.

peculiar manner a theme of great importance for Cavafy. The opposition and antagonism between Greek and 'barbarian' is one of the three great articulations and tensions in Cavafy's thought, the others being the opposition between pagan and Christian, and the opposition implicit in the phrase *ἀνομη ἡδονή*.¹⁶ It is true that Cavafy speaks of 'Hellenic' pleasure, but the austerity of the Greek is more often set against the sensuality of the non-Greek.¹⁷ A phrase from 'Julian Seeing Contempt' (1923) comes to mind: *Ἕλληνες ἦσαν ἐπὶ τέλους. Μὴδὲν ἄγαν*. So does the 'Greek sophist' in 'Salome' (1896) who is totally indifferent to her love for him and can turn from the sight of her bloody head on a golden platter to continue his reading in the dialogues of Plato.¹⁸

Ultimately, barbarian sensuality and Greek austerity are fused in the crucible of Cavafy's life and art. The best example of this fusion comes from 'For Ammonis, Who Died at 29, in 610' (1917):

Raphael, they're asking you to write a few lines
as an epitaph for the poet Ammonis . . .

Your Greek is always elegant and musical.
But we want all of your craftsmanship now.
Our sorrow and our love move into a foreign language.
Pour your Egyptian feeling into the Greek you use.

The poet, Raphael, Ammonis: none is Greek. Cavafy's point of

16. The phrase comes from 'In the Street' (1916). There are many variations on this expression in Cavafy's later poetry and, taken together, they show Cavafy as once again the possessor of an inner world he hesitated either to reveal or suppress, and an outsider to the normal world. Consider 'Hidden Things' (1908) and the poet's masks in 'Theatre of Sidon (A.D. 400)' (1923), 'In the Street' (1926), 'Passing Through' (1917), 'The Window of the Tobacco Shop' (1917), 'Their Beginning' (1921), and 'A Young Poet in his Twenty-Fourth Year' (1928).

17. 'Tomb of Iasis' (1917) and 'Of the Jews A.D. 50' (1919) reveal how Keeley can stress 'the hedonistic bias' of Hellenism in his essay on 'Cavafy's Hellenism', *Review of National Literatures*, V (1974), 67. But the austerity and lack of feeling of the Hellenes in the texts I discuss briefly in what follows suggests that this hedonistic bias disappears from the foreground when Cavafy is bent on contrasting barbarian feeling and Greek austerity.

18. *Ἀνέκδοτα Ποιήματα*, p. 87. Savidis reproduces the strange text that inspired this strange poem on p. 226.

view as an outsider makes it possible for him to conceive of a poet writing Greek for whom Greek was a foreign language. This poem, which has its remote origins in 'The Daughter of Menkeras', begins to move us closer to what Cavafy meant when he called himself *ἑλληνικός*, and suggests that the sense that he gave this word is not far different from the sense he gave *Ἀλεξανδρινός* when he spoke of Raphael's epitaph for Ammonis: *γὰρ Ἀλεξανδρινὸν γράφει Ἀλεξανδρινός*.

Ellada occurs next in the *Anekdotia* in 'Julian at the Mysteries' (1896)—the first of four poems Cavafy wrote on the emperor. His text was an episode in the life of the young emperor described both by Gregory Nazianzen and by Gibbon. In Cavafy's rendering of this episode, the antagonism between Greek and barbarian shifts to the conflict between paganism and Christianity. Again, his attitude is that of an outsider. The poet speaks as a Christian of Julian and his company of 'unholy Greeks', and he gives to his pagan and sophisticated Greeks the hollow boast: their gods—'the greatest gods of our glorious Greece'—did not flee in dread at the sight of Julian making the sign of the cross in his terror; they departed out of disgust with 'that vile, that crude sign'.

In these early poems, Greece is seen from the point of view of an outsider. It is not that of a 'Hellene'. Rather, it reveals the outlook of an observer who hides within himself something of the 'barbarian', and something of the Christian. Edmund Keeley's estimate of the *Anekdotia* is entirely just: they 'extend our view of this remarkable poet in startling ways'.¹⁹ In the case of 'The Daughter of Menkeras' and 'Julian at the Mysteries', our view of Cavafy's entire work is extended as the themes of his early, unpublished work are seen to contain, in embryo, the major themes and the distinctive point of view of the Canon. We come to understand him better from the work he denied to his Canon. Of the poems he decided not to publish, but did not destroy, 'Returning from Greece' (July 1914) is the most significant for an understanding of the place of Greece in Cavafy's poetry. It merits study, and we will return to it after encountering Greece in its two fleeting appearances in the Canon.

19. 'The "New" Poems of Cavafy', in *Modern Greek Writers*, eds. E. Keeley and P. Bien (Princeton, 1972), p. 143.

3. Greece in the Canon: After 1911.

'Dimaratos' was first written in 1904. Cavafy returned to it in 1911, and he finally had it printed in September 1921. The poem is Cavafy pure and simple—that is, it is extremely complex. Its setting comes as a surprise, for it is neither mainland Greece in 480 B.C. nor Sparta some years earlier. It is set, either in Rome or in Sicily, some time near the end of the third century A.D. The situation imagined is located in Persia, where the exiled king Dimaratos hopes to be restored to power when Xerxes triumphs in Greece. To put his theme at a greater distance in time and space Cavafy makes his poem of September 1921 the frame for the sketch of a young 'sophist' on a theme which he did not choose himself but which was suggested to him by the Neo-Platonist Porphyry: 'The Character of Dimaratos'. Cavafy had already adopted a similar strategy in 'Dareios' (1920).

Our sophist's character-sketch begins with a few simple lines, 'First a courtier of king Dareios', and moves to more complex and rhetorical issues as the anonymous artist attempts to imagine and recover the thoughts and feelings of the exiled king—'much worrying, much thinking, and for this reason / Dimaratos finds his days so burdensome'. The thought that makes him most unhappy is his growing realization that all his schemes and hopes are doomed and that the Greeks will emerge victorious.

It is in this context, within this double frame, and from the peculiar vantage ground of a balcony in Alexandria, that the name of Greece is first sighted in the poetry of Cavafy's Canon:

So now he spends his days full of anxiety,
advising the Persians, explaining
what they should do to conquer Greece.

'Greece'—this remote place figures once again in the poetry of the Canon, and once again it is seen as a place of defeat, illusion and frustrated hopes. For the Spartan king Greece was also a place of conflict, for the coming victory of the Greeks meant defeat for him personally. His reaction to his sure premonition of a Greek victory was ambivalent: 'what he's feeling can't be called joy'.

In his 'In Alexandria, 31 B.C.', Cavafy exhibits once again a peculiar view of a naval battle which ranks in our history books with Salamis. The odd angle on the world adopted in 'In Alexandria, 31 B.C.' is that of a street peddler who has entered Alexandria from his village at the outskirts (*στὰ περίχωρα*) of the great city. He is hawking incense, gum, premium olive oil, pomade, and as he penetrates Alexandria, he is caught up in the tumultuous crowds set in motion by the false news from the palace that 'Antony is winning in Greece'.

In its two brief appearances in the poetry of Cavafy's Canon, *Ellada* is seen as a distant place. As in 'Dimaratos', the *Ellada* of 'In Alexandria, 31 B.C.' is a place of illusion and defeat. But *Ellada* does not occupy a privileged place in Cavafy's poetry as a place of defeat. In Cavafy's history of Greece there are no victories and no triumphs. The Greek victory at Salamis was a defeat for Dimaratos, Octavian's victory at Actium a defeat for Antony. The viewpoint of the defeated, announced in 'Trojans' and 'Thermopylae', can be taken back to the unpublished 'Battle at Sea', where Cavafy takes the point of view of the defeated Persians. The 'triumph' of John Kantakuzenos (in 'John Kantakuzenos Triumphs' [1924]) is a defeat for an anonymous Byzantine nobleman who recognizes too late that he should have joined Lord John's party. Even the triumphs of Darius are qualified. They are questioned by a Persian poet, Phernazis (writing in Greek, of course) who wavers between concluding that Darius conquered Persia in a surge of arrogance and intoxication and quite a different attitude: a 'certain insight into the vanities of greatness'. Which was it? As the Roman legions begin to move across the borders of the Pontic kingdom of Darius's descendant Mithridates, Phernazis has it: 'arrogance and intoxication'. We are left with the second alternative and Cavafy's insight into the vanities of greatness.

The remoteness of Phernazis, the young sophist, and the peddler from the outskirts of Alexandria has its counterpart in the remoteness of the poet who looks down on the illusions of grandeur and knows the answer to the peddler's question: 'What in the hell's going on here?' Cavafy maintains his distance from Greece and from the great events of the past. These events come into sight from a humble, and even low vantage point on the edges of things. The triumph of Antony in Greece is

peripheral to the world of the peddler, as it was to the small Greek settlement in Asia Minor. It was a matter of indifference to the Greeks of these outlying parts whether Antony or Octavian won at Actium, and it was no trouble to substitute the name of Octavian for that of Antony on the honorary inscription composed for the occasion ('In a Township of Asia Minor' [1926]). Robert Liddell's Stoic epigram—*Victrix causa deis placuit, sed victa Cavafy*—is one attempt to capture the attitude of Cavafy the 'defeatist', but Cavafy was no Cato.²⁰ He was an observer, and from his peculiar point of view every triumph represented a defeat: immediately for the defeated and in time for the conqueror. In his poetry of history, the good fortune of 'Alexander Jannaïos and Alexandra' (1929)—'full of success, thoroughly satisfied'—or the triumphs of 'Alexander, son of Philip, and the Greeks except the Lacedaimonians' ('In the Year 200 B.C.' [1931]), are part of a larger poem which depends for its effect on all that Cavafy has left unsaid.²¹ The 'great new Hellenic world' contemplated with satisfaction by a Greek of the diaspora in 200 B.C. is overshadowed by our knowledge of what was just about to happen to this great, new world in 197 B.C., when the last of the Macedonian Philips whose kingdom went back to the conquests of Alexander ('this marvellous pan-Hellenic expedition, / triumphant, brilliant in every way') would be defeated decisively by a Roman army at Cynoscephalae. 'Wise men are aware of future things / just about to happen.' This is a truth known to both Cavafy and Apollonius of Tyana (cf. 'But the Wise Perceive Things about to Happen' [1915]). This awareness of the past forms the larger context for the two appearances of Greece in the poetry of Cavafy's Canon.

4. 'Returning from Greece.'

Well, we're nearly there, Hermippos.

Day after tomorrow, it seems—that's what the captain said.

20. Liddell, *Cavafy*, p. 195.

21. Seferis, *Δοκιμές*, I, p. 351, captures the importance of what Cavafy leaves unsaid in an historical poem like 'Alexander Jannaïos and Alexandra' (1929) in his reply to Peter Vlastos' caricature of Cavafy's poems as 'statue bases without their statue': *Ἡ καταστροφή εἶναι τὸ ἀγαλμα ποὺ λείπει*.

At least we're sailing our seas,
the waters of our own countries—Cyprus, Syria, Egypt—
waters we know and love.

Why so silent? Ask your heart:
didn't you too feel happier
the farther we got from Greece?
What's the point of fooling ourselves?
That wouldn't be properly Greek, would it?

It's time we admitted the truth:
we're Greeks also—what else are we?—
but with Asiatic tastes and feelings,
tastes and feelings
sometimes alien to Hellenism.

It isn't correct, Hermippos, for us philosophers
to be like some of our petty kings
(remember how we laughed at them
when they used to come to our lectures?)
who through their showy Hellenified exteriors
(Macedonian exteriors, naturally)
let a bit of Arabia peep out now and then,
a bit of Media they can't keep back.
And to what laughable lengths the fools went
trying to cover it up!

No, that's not at all correct for us.
For Greeks like us that kind of pettiness won't do.
We simply can't be ashamed
of the Syrian and Egyptian blood in our veins;
we should really honor it, delight in it.

Cavafy wrote this poem in July 1914. It was first published by George Savidis in 1968 from a MS. which bears witness both to the stages of its composition and the rightness of Cavafy's judgement about himself: 'They will understand me the better from all the denials I have made.'²² The textual notes Savidis

22. *Καὶ θὰ μὲ καταλαμβάνουν τὸ πλήρτερον, ἀπ' τὰ δσα ἀρνήθηκα*—quoted by Savidis at the head of his introduction to the *Anekdotia*. 'Returning to Greece' is printed on p. 159 of the *Anekdotia*, Savidis' textual notes pp. 242–44. Savidis takes the MS. entry *ἀπ' τὴν Ἀττικὴν* to be a variant of line 7, although it appears *κάτω ἀπὸ τὸν τίτλο*, p. 243.

provides in his edition of the *Anekdotia* repay study. As it is printed in the *Anekdotia*, the poem seems to have its own integrity. But the MS. which preserves the poem Savidis prints also preserves another rather different poem. On the first page of the MS., below the title to the right, there are two words Cavafy added in pencil. They are difficult to make out, but their first editor thought he could read: ἀπ' τὴν Ἀττική. If these are the words Cavafy wrote, we recover something of great interest in the choice that confronted the poet. Should he announce the poem as 'Returning from Greece' or 'Returning from Attica'? He chose Greece, but we can conclude from the variant that Greece and Attica were not far apart in Cavafy's mind. Nowhere else in his poetry does Cavafy speak of Attica, and Athens is a place named only once in the Canon. And clearly the question of Hermippos' anonymous companion ('we're Greeks also—what else are we?') points to the Athenians. And for most people, Attica and its centre, Athens, are the centre of the Greek world—Ἑλλάδος Ἑλλάς, Ἀθῆναι.²³

The title which Cavafy chose for his poem remains remarkable and paradoxical. The word which Keeley and Sherrard translate as 'return' is not, as one might guess, ἐπιστροφή, but ἐπάνοδος, and I would prefer to render the sense of the title by 'Going Home from Greece', for an ἐπάνοδος is a return home, to one's own country. Ἐπάνοδος ἀπὸ τὴν Ἑλλάδα: this precisely is the paradox of the poem: How can a Greek return home by leaving Greece?

The situation the poem imagines is this: two Greek 'sophists' are on a ship taking them from Athens to the East. The speaker is anonymous. It is the anticipation of arriving home, of returning to his πατρίδα that prompts what he says to a silent companion named Hermippos. It seems almost a relief to be away from Greece and out of Greek waters:

Τουλάχιστον στὴν θάλασσά μας πλέουμε·
νερὰ τῆς Κύπρου, τῆς Συρίας, καὶ τῆς Αἰγύπτου,
ἀγαπημένα τῶν πατρίδων μας νερά.

Two Greeks are on their way *home* from Greece—to a πατρίδα which is not Hellas.

23. From Thucydides' epitaph for Euripides, *Greek Anthology*, VII, 45.

One of the numerous variants which Cavafy entered on the last page of our MS. and then crossed out makes it clear, if it is not abundantly clear from the poem itself, that the paradox of the poem lies in the word *ἐπάνοδος* and its inevitable implication that Greece, *Ellada*, has become a foreign country. In the MS., Hermippos' reaction to his companion's language ('at least we're sailing our seas / the waters of our own countries') is brought out by the question: 'Why did you seem so annoyed / when I said "our own countries"?'

Cavafy's final comment on making the paradox of the poem so overt is the fact that he rejected these lines with the comment (in English): 'of not much use, I think'. They are not. Hermippos' silence says all that needs saying.

Another approach to the problem of 'Going Home from Greece' which did not survive was Cavafy's initial decision to cast the poem in the form of a dialogue and give Hermippos a reply to what his nameless friend has said, in low and colloquial Greek, about the 'Hellenified' barbarians of the East. This dialogue, if it can be called a dialogue, would have had one exchange:

Companion: And to what laughable lengths the fools went
trying to cover it up.

Hermippos: I know all that, perfectly well.
You don't need to tell me.
But the day after tomorrow, when I'm back
teaching,
I won't speak like that.
A Professor of Greek Culture,
controlled—enslaved is a better word—
by a devotion to Greek Thought,
I will not speak slightly of the imitation of
things Greek.
Even if I wanted to, I wouldn't know how.

Hermippos' silence is more eloquent than this. It is Cavafy's silence—the silence of the Cavafy who suppressed Hermippos' reply and finally decided that 'Returning from Greece' was not for publication, but could remain. Hermippos' thoughts on leaving Greece are not a part of the finished poem, and all of the

nervous and confident talk of his friend is undercut and qualified by his silence. To his claim that Hermippos should honour and delight in the Syrian and Egyptian blood in his veins, Hermippos makes no reply. The name Hermippos itself might be significant. In his notes to *C. P. Cavafy: Collected Poems*, Savidis suggests that our Hermippos might be the third century B.C. biographer or the grammarian who lived under Trajan and Hadrian. But it seems more likely that Hermippos is one of the many *φανταστικά πρόσωπα* of Cavafy's poetry of Greek history and that Hermippos is all that Cavafy wanted in a name—a good Greek name for a man of mixed blood and a 'sophist' of the Greek diaspora.

In his own way, C. P. Cavafy kept silent about his thoughts on leaving the mainland of Greece to discover his home on the edges of the Greek world in Alexandria and the culture of Alexandria and the diaspora. Hermippos' silence betrays the difficulty of accepting emotionally the truth of his companion's boast:

For Greeks like us that kind of pettiness won't do.
We simply can't be ashamed
of the Syrian and Egyptian blood in our veins;
we should really honour it, delight in it.

Νὰ τὸ τιμήσουμε καὶ νὰ τὸ καυχηθοῦμε. The boast is as hollow as that of Antioch, proud of its connection with Argos through Ione, Inachos' daughter: *καυχιέται ποὺ εἶναι πόλις / παλαιόθεν ἑλληνίς* ('Greek from Ancient Times' [1927]).

5. *Καβάφης ὁ ἑλληνικός.*

The silence of Hermippos suggests that Cavafy's rejection of mainland Greece for Alexandria was not something that came without an inner struggle. His attitude towards Greece has the same ambivalence as that of Dimaratos: 'His feeling can't be called joy.' But in his poetry there are only a few signs of what it might have cost to give up Hellas and find a new country in the larger Greek world. Cavafy's historical imagination found its home in what he knew almost as a part of his own life as the son of one of Alexandria's short-lived *protoklassatoi* living in a small

outpost of Hellenism. And there is no better description of his attitude towards the history of the Hellenic people than that of Seferis: fundamentally, 'his world is located on the edges of places, men, and ages'.²⁴

Early on, in 1892, Cavafy began to reconnoitre the terrain that was to become his home. His imagination returned for a moment to dwell in the Greece revealed in 'The Mimiamboi of Herodas' (discovered in 1890), 'hidden for ages in the obscurity of the Egyptian earth':

They carry us back again to the gay life
of Greek ways and marketplaces,
and with them we enter the life
and vitality of a strange, wonderful community.

The citizens of this strange, wonderful community have names such as Metro and Metriche, and their callings are as diverse as those of the procuress and the brothel keeper. Cavafy was already entering the Hellenistic age and the outskirts of men, places, and ages. The centre of this world was to become Alexandria, 'queen of the Greek world, genius of all knowledge, of every art' ('The Glory of the Ptolemies' [1911]). Alexandria provides the setting for at least twenty-five of Cavafy's poems.²⁵

Cavafy has nothing to say of Olympia or Attica or the Acropolis. Corinth is named only once in his Canon. It is the source of the spoils unloaded on the coast of Italy in 146 B.C. ('On an Italian Shore' [1925]). Thebes is named only as the place where Evrion studied Sacred Scripture ('Tomb of Evrion' [1914]). Cavafy travels once to Delphi, from one point of view the centre of the Greek world, only to shift, with devastating irony, to 'the oracle that was pronounced in Rome' ('Envoys from Alexandria' [1918]). The classicist will be pleased to find the names of Sparta (in the dative case) and Kleomenes in a

24. *Δοκίμης*, I, p. 354.

25. The student of Cavafy will find a revealing 'map' of Cavafy's Hellenism in the table 'The Ancient World of Hellenism. Principal Settings' which E. Keeley provides in his *Cavafy's Alexandria* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1976). This table gives a chronology; there is also an outline map of 'The Ancient World of Hellenism'.

poem of 1928, but the Kleomenes who plays his part in Cavafy's dramatic parable is Kleomenes III (235–219 B.C.), and he and his mother, Kratisikleia, are the pawns of a Lagid. Sparta is named for a last time in 'Come, O King of the Lakedaimonians' (1929) when we get a last glimpse of the courage of an actress on the stage of history who knew her part.

But Sparta and Athens are not part of the 'great, new Hellenic world' announced 'In the Year 200 B.C.'. The 'we' of this poem is the voice of Alexandrians, the people of Antioch and Seleukia, 'other Greeks of Egypt and Syria, and those of Media, and Persia, and all the rest'. 'And all the rest' does not include the Athenians, no more than it included the Lakedaimonians. Athens, the apple of our eye, barely scrapes its way into the Canon. It makes its one brief appearance in 'Herodes Attikos' (1912), and then the city which was at one time considered the Greece of Greece is deserted. The centre of things is to be found on the edges—*στὴν ἐξοχή*, where the 'sophist' Herodes is declaiming to young Athenians. Herodes stands at the centre of this world, and Athens is named only because Herodes is not in it. Athens makes its most glorious appearance in the poetry of Cavafy in an early, unpublished poem of November 1895 as that part of the world whose hallmarks are ANTHROPOS and LOGOS.²⁶ It was only a début. Cavafy never returned to this frigid praise, inspired by an oration of Himerios, of the centre of the culture of the Greek mainland. Indeed, he seems to have avoided both Athens and the Greek mainland in his later poetry. As he moves through Greek lands he seems careful to skirt Greece. The trip of a 'Sophist leaving Syria' (1926) will take Cavafy's sophist from the port of Antioch to Alexandria and from there to Rome. Greece is nowhere in this triangle. As for the race of classicists, they are named once in 'The Mimiambos of Herodas' when the Egyptian poet calls them *ἀπὸ τὸν Βορρᾶ σοφοὶ ἄνδρες*.

Samosata, Amisos, Edessa, Tyana, Phraata, Osroini, Zagros—one wonders how these names were received in Athens. And one thinks of a question Mikis Ralli put to his young friend Constantine on the occasion of a visit to Athens in June of 1882 and an encounter with a Euripides and an Achilles

26. *Ἀνέκδοτα Ποιήματα*, p. 79.

Constantinides: 'Have you ever heard, among Christians, such weird names?'²⁷ There are names as strange as these in the poetry of Cavafy: Temethos, Mevis, Emonidis, Imenos, Remon. Ammonis, Lanis. And one asks the question asked of the Philhellene out beyond Zagros and Phraata: Ποῦ οἱ Ἕλληνες: Ποῦ τὰ Ἑλληνικά: ('Philhellene' [1912]). A Greek name is no proof of Greekness, as we know from the case of our laconic Aristomenes, son of Menelaos, in 'A Prince from Western Libya' (1928). Nor is a 'barbaric' name like Cavafy (from the Turkish *ayakkabıcı*, a shoemaker) proof of barbarism. In Cavafy's poetry the 'barbarian' is capable of assuming Greek form. The young tough Remon from Osroini, lying wounded from a tavern brawl in a moon-lit room, brings the thoughts of his friends back to Plato's Charmides ('In a Town of Osroini' [1917]). And the name of C. P. Cavafy, with its 'English' middle initial and its memories of Byzantium, Christianity, and the *Tourkokratia*, brings us back to Cavafy ὁ ἑλληνικός.

Cavafy was a subject of the Greek nation or Hellas, but his Hellenism was least of all a matter of being of 'genuine, Grecian race'. In later life he was fundamentally indifferent to the question of ethnic purity. He was perfectly content to live as a Greek of mixed blood among the barbarians. In retrospect it is strange to look back on Cavafy's early attack on James Knowles, who dared to question the claim Greece—'the mixed little population which now lives on the ruins of ancient Greece'—had to the Elgin marbles.²⁸ His attack came in 1891 when Cavafy could speak confidently of 'Hellas and the unity of Hellenic tradition', cast doubt on Fallmerayer's theory, and speak of the Elgin marbles as 'the lovely diamonds of Attica'. But the narrow patriotism which resented Fallmerayer and the 'vandalic' acts of Lord Elgin, and focused on mainland Greece, *anagenesis*, and the glories of free and classical Greece, never really took hold of Cavafy.

When he was awarded the Order of the Phoenix in 1926, Cavafy had occasion to speak of the love and reverence he felt

27. Quoted by E. Roditi in his 'Cavafis and the Permanence of Greek History', *Poetry*, LXXXI (1953), 390.

28. This attack was published, in English, in the Alexandrian periodical *Rivista Quindicinale*, III (1891), 60–1, and was reprinted by P. M. Fraser in *Modern Language Review*, LVIII (1963), 66–8.

for the Greek state,²⁹ but no emblem recognizes and represents Cavafy's Hellenism less adequately than the phoenix. For Cavafy, Greece never died. This historian of the Greek experience never felt 'The dead have been awakened—shall I sleep?'.³⁰ He never fought for the Ancients. He lived with them on familiar terms. The Greece that he knew best as an Alexandrian began to live for him at precisely that moment in Greek history when Europe gave it up for dead. George Grote's great whig *History of Greece* ends with the degrading begging mission of Demochares to Lysimachus: 'When such begging missions are the deeds for which Athens both employed and recompensed her most eminent citizens, an historian accustomed to the Greek world as described by Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon, feels that the life has departed from his subject, and with sadness and humiliation brings his narrative to a close'.³¹ It is precisely at this moment that Cavafy's *History of Greece* can be said to open.

What epitaph would this maker of epitaphs have chosen for himself? His most recent biographer, Robert Liddell, took a line from Cavafy's epitaph for Ammonis and called him 'an Alexandrian of the Alexandrians'. There is another epitaph in the poetry of the Canon that might suit Cavafy better than this. It is the epitaph the Ephesian sophist Kallistratos made for Antiochus, King of Kommagini—the gentle, restrained, and scholarly king of Cavafy's imagination:

29. Liddell, *Cavafy*, pp. 190–1.

30. Byron in a poem entered into his *Journal* in Cephalonia, *Byron: Letters and Diaries*, ed. P. Quennell, II (London, 1967), p. 739. The phrase 'I must do all I can for the Ancients' comes from his letter to Douglas Kinnaird, 23 October 1823, *Letters and Diaries* II, p. 753. By contrast to Cavafy's conception of the continuing life of Greece, Palamas' prophetic vision of the regrowth of the wings of Greece's ancient glory would seem to answer better to the symbolism of the Order of the Phoenix:

γὰρ τ' ἀνέβασμα ζανὰ ποὺ σὲ καλεῖ
θά αἰστανθῆς νὰ σοῦ φυτρώσουν, ὦ χαρά!
τὰ φτερά,
τὰ φτερά τὰ πρωτινά σου τὰ μεγάλα!

Kostis Palamas, 'Ὁ δωδεκάλογος τοῦ γύφτου, Λόγος Η', *Ἀπαντα*, III (Athens, 1960), p. 400.

31. G. Grote, *A History of Greece*, II (London, 1884), p. 214.

He was that best of all things, Hellenic—
mankind has no quality more precious:
everything beyond that belongs to the gods.

Cavafy was not a Hellene, although he had something of the Hellene in him—something he both revealed and concealed when he assumed the mask of a Dimaratos, a Hermippos, or a Kimos, son of Menedoros, and stood ‘preoccupied, dejected’ as he watched the booty from Mummius’ sack of Corinth unloaded from Roman ships (‘On an Italian Shore’ [1925]). He was still less a *ἑλληνίζων*. He did not imitate ‘Greek’ manners, and Greek was his first language and the only bearer of his fame. In an early essay on Shakespeare, he spoke of Shakespeare as having lived ‘outside the walls of the city of Greek speech’.³² Cavafy, whose world is to be found on the edges of places, men, and times, was not an outsider to this city. It was a city that extended from Sicily deep into Asia Minor, and Cavafy was its greatest citizen.

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32. *Ἑλληνικά ἔχνη ἐν τῷ Σακεσπέρῳ*, ed. G. Savidis, *Ἀγγλοελληνικὴ Ἐπιθεώρηση*, VII (1954), 11. Cavafy gave a notion of what it was like to be cut off from this ‘city’ in two of the *Anekdotia*, ‘Epitaph’ (1893) and ‘Poseidonians’ (1906).

The close of this essay is the place to recognize its beginnings: a National Endowment for the Humanities junior fellowship that enabled me to study modern Greek literature in 1974 and 1975; Professor Harry Levy, who invited me to talk on Cavafy at the joint meetings of the American Philological Association and the Modern Greek Studies Association in Christmas of 1975 and thereby forced me to write on a modern Greek author; Peter Bien whose *δύο λόγια* helped me transform a lecture into an essay; and Edmund Keeley whose *Cavafy’s Alexandria* gave me my orientation on Cavafy’s Greece.